

Internet as a missionary tool 2.0

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Summary

We are living a time of multiple believes in a multireligious world. It's also a time of intensification of atheism. Religion has to adapt itself, to reinvent itself, strengthening its speech through new signs and new speeches.

Young people, digital natives, no longer accept the traditional ways of Faith transmission.

Christianity is now a matter of free choice rather than a cultural heritage.

The change of paradigms and the awareness that the speech should become closer to people interests induces Church to join without restriction the new digital and interactive media. We assist, therefore, to the evangelization of the digital generation through official sites and social networks like *My Space*, *Facebook* and *YouTube*.

The portal Pope2You, created by Vatican has links to major social networks – *YouTube*, *Facebook* and *Twitter*, allowing the access to Vatican videos and to the Pope's speeches. The application Pope2You in *Facebook* provides papal messages, while the application H2Onews for iPhone and iPod spreads the church speech throughout the world. In short, these are resources to transmit God's word through a "technological tool closer to young people" (Ecclesia Agency, Portugal).

Like in other countries, Portuguese religious institutions are aware of the power of these new mediators and appeal to advertising and communication agencies to implement new communication strategies targeted at the young.

In a case study presented in 2010 (IAMCR Braga, Portugal) we proposed to broach this tendency and its implications. As an approach method we shared data about young people's behavior through market research, followed by an analysis of a Vocations Campaign In *MySpace*. The study focused on the analysis of the advertising campaign launched in Portugal in 2009 by the Episcopal Commission Vocations and Ministries. Under the slogan "Discover a

world you think you already know. Open your mind to www.myspace.vocacoes.com", the national campaign has launched a page in a social network, where young people could change opinions, create a network of friends and get to know the other side of religious life.

Trying to evaluate the consistency of the phenomenon, we propose to analyze the campaign launched by the same entity in 2010. This time, using *Facebook* as a mediation platform the campaign challenges: "Look carefully around you. There are more people like you!" what confirms the success of this type of strategies in institutions that try to remake its speech to survive in the religious market.

The campaign isn't but the confirmation of the vitality of a network, where the Internet emerges as a missionary tool, on line with a digital generation that likes a space "alive with a lively, human and collective presence"(Kerckhove, 1995).

Keywords: religion, social networking, advertising, internet, digital natives.

The secularization process

"More than one sixth of the world population is Catholic, but the Church of Christ has been losing influence" ¹. Religion seems to be reducing its importance as an aggregator element of societies, not only in European countries but also in Australia, New Zealand or Canada.

In Britain, for example, a study conducted by the British Social Attitudes (BSA)² reveals two utterly different results between 1985 and 2010. Every year, British Social Attitudes researchers recourse to a significant sample of British, asking them if they belong to any particular religion, and if so, which one.

The first study, carried out in 1985 revealed that 63% of the British people considered themselves Christians, while 34% answered they had no religion. A non-significant minority belonged to non-Christian religions.

1 Web Trends, p. 200

2 "Respecting the minority" Editorial The Guardian, 24th December 2010 www.guardian.co.uk from 30th May 2011

Twenty-five years later, in 2010, the BSA published its annual report revealing a new reality: only 42% of British identify themselves as Christians while 51% declared they had no religion. Although other studies don't show such a reduction, as the census data, it is impossible not to feel that this latest discovery of the British Social Attitudes defines a cultural change.

The most relevant factor is perhaps, the celerity of this cultural change. "It isn't very far from the time when everyplace was closed on Sundays, since most people used to go to some kind of church, bearing in mind that all students knew and sang hymns and studied the Bible even if they didn't believe, and that public figures couldn't but be attentive Christians".³

Is religion in extinction?

Another study released at the site of BBC⁴ based on census from nine countries, announced with some alarm: "Religion is in extinction". According to these researchers named by the article, there's a steady growth of those who declare to have no religious affiliation. The result of the study, reported at the *American Physical Society* in Dallas, in The United States, indicates that religion will completely disappear in those countries.

The team based themselves on census data, going back almost a century in the analysis of countries where the census admits religious affiliation: Australia, Austria, Canada, Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand and Switzerland.

Its means of data analysis follow what is known as nonlinear dynamics - a mathematical approach that has been used to explain a wide range of physical phenomena in which the number of factors play a role. In all countries, the results indicated religion as being endangered.

One of the researchers involved, Richard Wiener (*Research Corporation For Science Advancement* at University of Arizona) admits that the analysis model should be updated, however, does not hesitate to classify this as a "suggestive result". "It's interesting

³ Idem

⁴ "Religion may become extinct in nine nations, study says" by Bason Palmer, BBC News, Dallas www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-12811197? From 30th May 2011

that a fairly simple model captures the information and, if these simple ideas are correct, it suggests where this is going to go." ⁵

Even brilliant minds have been changing their position, turning it public. Take for example the recent case of British scientist Stephen Hawking, whose position towards religion has hardened significantly since the publication of his work on the cosmos. In *A Brief History of Time* (1988), Hawking suggested that the idea of a divine being would not necessarily be incompatible with a scientific explanation of the universe. However, in his latest book, released in 2010, *The Grand Design*, he defends that the divinity has no longer place in theories about the creation of the Universe, having in mind new developments in physics. In this work, he says the new theories of physics can explain in full the emergence of the universe, rendering superfluous the role of a creator "God". According to *The Times* "the universe could create himself - and in fact it did - out of nowhere. The spontaneous creation is the reason for something to exist, for the existence of the universe, for our existence." ⁶

These statements of Hawking travelled the world and were particularly welcome by the well-known biologist and atheist militant, Richard Dawkins, who declared that 'Darwinism expelled God from biology, but in physics the uncertainty persisted. But now, Hawking gave him the coup de grace.' ⁷

A new Era: the Church proceeding to digital evangelization

To a scenario of some skepticism towards the Catholic religion should be added the phenomenon of the multi-religious market. Religion is now disseminated through a variety of denominations that offer, in the religious market (Pierucci, 1997) ⁸ a range of options that varies according to the interests of those seeking multiple meanings for existence.

5 "Religion may become extinct in nine nations, study says" by Bason Palmer, BBC News, Dallas www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-12811197? From 20 April 2011

6 "Hawking and God" by Anselmo Borges, Diário de Notícias 18th september 2010 www.dn.pt/Common/print.aspx?content_id=1665513 from 30 May 2011

7 "Idem"

8 in Patriota, K. (s/d): Fé na Prateleira de Vendas: a Sedução do Marketing Religioso

What is certain is that there is a change from Christianity as a culture, a tradition, to Christianity as a choice (Brieresly, 1991) ⁹. In a certain sense, the obligation to obedience to religion is no longer available.

Religious institutions are finally aware of the distance between people and the church. Religious education by the Church, education at schools and religious socialization at home are losing contact with the younger generations, perhaps because these generations no longer accept the traditional models of transmission of Faith. Places of worship have are any longer obligatory places nor rituals are unquestionable.

At the same time, the easiest access to information and religious pluralism, make young people question about some fundamental pillars on which the Catholic Church lays.

Therefore, the church has to renew, to reinvent itself, trying to find new ways of attracting the faithful. The example came from above. In 1967, Pope Paul VI devoted particular attention to the media launching the first World Communications Day. Announcing the initiative, the Pope called the attention of "all men of good will to the vast and complex phenomenon of modern media such as press, cinema, radio and television (...) Thanks to these wonderful techniques, human society has achieved new dimensions: time and space have been overcome, and man became a citizen of the world, co-participant and witness of the most distant events and of the vicissitudes of all mankind." ¹⁰

In 1990, John Paul II, known for his ability as an excellent communicator, wrote an article about "The Christian message in today's computer culture." In 2002, the message for the World Communications Day focuses on "Internet: a new forum for proclaiming the Gospel." Following the motto, the succeeding Pope Benedict XVI, wrote about communication in the digital era. In 2006 he broached the theme "The Media: A Network for Communication, Communion and Cooperation." Later, in 2009, he wrote an essay on "New Technologies, New Relationships. Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship." In 2010, he pursues

9 idem

10 Message of Pope Paul VI for the first World Day of Social Communications in 1967 from 30th May 2011
www.agenciaecclesia.pt

the same item:" The priest and the pastoral in the Digital World: the new media, a means of spreading the Word. "Finally, in 2011, he titrates the message of the World Communications Day as follows: "Truth, advertising and authenticity of life in digital age." In a consistent way, Benedict XVI stimulates the church to take a place in the digital space. This urgency has been suggested by the Vatican since the early 90's.

Sustained by this assumption, the Church walks confidently the pathways of the Internet, through websites and social networks to reach the digital generation. But it also appeals to the use of "enhancement technologies" (Kerckhove, 1995) as the iPod and iPhone. The portal Pope2You, created by the Vatican, appeared for the celebrations of the 43rd World Communications Day in May 2009.

It has links to major social networks like *YouTube*, *Facebook* or *Twitter*, one can access to videos from the Vatican and to the Pope's speeches. It has been created to convey God's message through a "technological means close to the young" as the news Agency Ecclesia, informs. "The application for *Facebook* Pope2You (...) allows you to receive messages from Benedict XVI, photos and postcards that can be shared freely. The application for iPhone and iPod H2Onews spreads the most important news about the church all over the world (...)."

Other associations follow this example as the initiative "pray-as-you-go.org." Created by the Jesuits in England, this site invites you to download mp3 for prayers so that Christians can make their prayers anywhere, anytime.

This initiative is already online in Portugal. www.passo-a-rezar.net¹¹ was released in 2010 and has about 12.100 friends, until the date of completion of this research. As mentioned in the Portuguese website, "on the way to work or to college, in a public that transport or in the traffic, to pray is not an 'utopia' or an 'impossible desire': the www.pass-to-rezar.net, gives you the possibility of transforming each place in a place of meeting God, a 'holly space'. "¹¹

¹¹ www.passo-a-rezar.net from 20th May 2011

There are many examples of religious institutions throughout the world that have joined the digital world, through websites, blogs or social networks: www.mivocacion.com, blogs.periodistadigital.com/vocational, www.godtube.com, sacredspace.ie, [paroquiabenedita.dyndns.ws: 8000/parquia/jogo/index.](http://paroquiabenedita.dyndns.ws:8000/parquia/jogo/index.); www.capuchinhos.org / bible, are some among many others, suggestive and new places of evangelization.

What do people and especially young people look for in these places of digital worship?

The sharing of common interests and a spirit of community. According to an article published in The New York Times "¹² Caitlin Todd, a 16 year old, likes to make friends at social network sites, but doesn't like what he considers inappropriate contents. Caitlin knows people only in Christian social sites like www.hisholyspace.com and www.xianz.com and where the profanity is forbidden, prayer is encouraged and the content is carefully controlled.

Many users of social networks explore only parts of sites that are of their interest to "I imagine groups that consider social networking technology useful and want to keep a group. I go to Xianz because it is a place I can go and have the company of friends. To share the word of God and help the others Caitlin wrote in an email. "Xianzi is like a big church!" Many social networking groups with religious themes are now on the Internet, allowing users to create prayer groups, discuss movies and find other topics of interest. Also according to the above article, creators and users claim that the sites are alternatives to social networks like MySpace, which, despite having 100.000 religious groups, also contain content that people, like Robbie Davidson, founder of Xianz.com, consider offensive.

"Many people are tired of seeing half naked women in ads" on social networking sites, says Davidson, quoted by the newspaper. Your site created in 2010 has about 30.000 members. "I wanted to provide a safe alternative that was familiar and friendly to the Christians. " Xianz.com is constructed as a " MySpace based on Faith". But not all site are directed to Christians. Muslims and jewish has theirs virtual spaces too.

12 "Web Space Where Religion and Social Networking Meet" by Katie Zezima from www.nytimes.com 30th May 2011

Many of these sites are controlled to prevent publication of profanity, sexually explicit content or derogatory language. Davidson states that he has already excluded people from the site.

Judith Donath, an associate professor at the Media Lab (Media Lab) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who studies social networks, argues that sometimes there are groups that “want to maintain a fairly closed group that is not interested in interacting with a large group of people whose lives are antithetical to their own” says Donath.

"This might happen especially if someone has a very specific set of cultural mores and wants a particular symbolism, reminding everyone what the site stands for and believes in." ¹³

Summarizing, in the sites targeted to religion, young people find a certain gregarious sense, thanks to the Internet. But at the same time, they try to protect themselves from exposure to less serious posts or posts contrary to their beliefs.

From what we have said, we assess that the success of religious spaces in the digital media isn't related to the idea of the most popular or visited sites.

What is happening in Portugal

Like in other countries, Portugal is facing similar problems. Despite being a historically Catholic country we have been assisting to the emergence of movements that challenge religion. The latest example is the Atheist Portal – Portuguese Atheist Movement (PAMAP), created in 2009. It focuses on the dissemination of atheism and fights against dogmas that consider "castrating" for society in general.

Helena Vilaça, a religion sociologist says “in Portugal there is actually an upward tendency in the number of minority faithful But the Portuguese society hasn't a strong religious market, as Latin America, where we saw significant changes in some other religions. In Brazil and Chile,

¹³ “Web Space Where Religion and Social Networking Meet” by Katie Zezima www.nytimes.com from 30th may 2011

Protestants increased about 20%. In Portugal, the number of people without religion is the most significant. Yet we are one of the countries with higher religious practices, with values very close to those of Ireland or Poland'.¹⁴ However, Vilaça believes that Portugal is entering a process of secularization, as has happened with other European countries.

For the sociologist, the main question is the decline in religious practice and traditional Christian beliefs. "Instead of people saying they believe in God, with whom they have a special relationship, now they say they believe in a spirit or living force. One sees the influence of other religious representations, more cosmic and more Orientalist.

There is also a decreasing number of religious rituals such as marriage, baptism, communion or even funerals. We also live in an era where religion is no longer a taboo or something completely privatized."¹⁵

The case Secretariat for Vocations

Having in mind atheist movements, the changing of social attitudes and the increase of the religious offer, the Catholic church responds with the Internet. Conscious of the new digital mediators, asks to communication and advertising agencies to implement new communication strategies, especially in what young people are concerned.

In a case study presented in 2010 (IAMCR Braga, Portugal) we decided to tackle this trend and its implications. As approach method, we shared data on young people's behavior through a market research, followed by an analysis of a Vocation Campaign on MySpace concerning the discourse and interpretation of results.

The study focused on the analysis of the advertising campaign launched in Portugal in 2009 by the Vocation Secretariat. Under the slogan "Discover a world you already think you know. Open your mind to www.myspace.vocacoes.com, "the national campaign, uses a page on a social

¹⁴ Jornal de Leiria (regional newspaper) 7th may 2009, from 15th April 2011

¹⁵ Idem

network still online, where young people can exchange points of view, create a network of friends and get to know the other side of religious life.

Trying to evaluate the consistency of the phenomenon, we propose to analyze the campaign launched by the same entity, the following year in 2010.

Using *Facebook* as a mediation platform, the campaign is called "There's more people like you!" and seems to confirm the success of such strategies in institutions seeking to renew his speech as a way of surviving in the religious market.

Strategy

The Internet emerges as a missionary tool, in line with "a generation that reacts badly to taxes, therefore, instinctively adheres to a media that is not invasive, that don't call people, it is people who seek for it" (Kerchove, 1995).

Finally, the space on the Internet is "alive with a vibrant, human and collective presence" (ibid.).

Therefore, the online strategy has become the natural choice. Religious organizations speak the same language of the younger, asserting themselves as organizations that although preserving its values and traditions, evolve, modernize and adapt to a different world, more demanding, but very lacking in spiritual support .

Rather than a positioning strategy, the choice is a seduction strategy, predisposing the receptor to a world that until then, seemed very distant from their usual virtual and virtuous places.

Vocations Week Campaign 2010: There are more people like you!

Let us focus then on the presentation and analysis of a communication strategy undertaken by the Vocations Portuguese Secretariat, on the 47th Week of Prayer for Vocations, which took place from 18 to 25 May 2010. For a better understanding, it should be referred that the Week of Prayer for Vocations is a nationwide action which is developed in parishes, catechesis and Christian-oriented schools with the aim to attract young people to follow their vocation in the

Church. It seeks to stimulate the relationship between members of the Christian community, so that the human and Christian values are known, estimated, and enjoyed. As in 2009, the goal in 2010, was to develop a campaign to develop affinities between the church and young people, creating a greater identification with those who already are predisposed to the religious life. The proposal of the communication released on MySpace in 2009, focused on the deconstruction of prejudices, followed by a strategy developing a sense of belonging to a community.



Under the slogan "More people like you!" the campaign uses *Facebook* to boost vocations among young people. "Meet up on facebook and add the page" is the call made at the poster distributed in all parishes. Once on the page, visitors are invited to experience the program of the week (the Guidelines) and leave their testimony. The

sharing of personal histories is the prevailing motto on the page, who has already won 1.400 fans. Among the various testimonies, we have retained two that seemed significant as a response to the challenge launched in the campaign. At a certain point, at the Mural, one can read "I am sister Kristina, I'm Polish and I'm part of the community of St. Paul's Daughters in Faro. As this is the week of Prayer for Vocations I 'd like to share the story of my vocation. (...) All this led me to discover my place on earth. I'm happy, and every day I thank the Lord for this gift, the gift of vocation. Problems, questions? There have been, there are and probably there will be. But they are there to overcome them and to strengthen our vocation and choice: 'My grace is enough for you '..."¹⁶

With a similar spirit of intimacy and authenticity, seminarian Miguel Bandeirinha, posted the following: "I'm still discovering my vocation ... I feel I am being called to discover myself ... I feel I want to help others, I want to serve persons... I want to follow the footsteps of Jesus. I attend a seminar and I am discovering what I really want to be. I feel the call since my childhood and I want to go wherever God takes me ... "¹⁷

The Interactivity obtained permits to look at this case as a web 2.0 strategy, well succeeded, as people engage in a dialogue and contribute with stories and information that can help the community. The mode of the campaign is mainly testimonial. The poster shows a young man like many others, with a relaxed but somewhat restless and curious, as if he is looking for something. Several icons hover over his head to exteriorize his thoughts. It is clearly a character who represents all the young people who feel a certain call to religious life but that have typical references of the contemporary society: music, technology, fashion, communication ... The atmosphere is cool, inducing a visit to the page. The Guide, which serves as a guideline for all actions to be undertaken by religion teachers and catechists develops in a modern and lively language, removing the secular pressure to the decision making.

¹⁶ www.facebook.com/gentecomotu

¹⁷ idem

The growing of evangelization in social networks

The two campaigns who bet on social networks, were followed by a third one, by the initiative of the same entity and seeming to validate the strategy web.20 as a missionary tool. In 2011, again in connection with the Week of Vocations, Vocations Secretariat appeals to a communication agency to create a new campaign. Taking as a starting point the theme of the 48th Week - to propose vocations in the local church, launched by the Pope, the strategic communication center line, focuses on the need to go beyond the sense of belonging, transforming every receiver into a true ambassador of the message, generating a viral movement in local church and its surroundings. Creativity focuses this time on the active call: "You've been chosen! Spread the Word! In your own parish and in "spreading the word" in facebook! "

Sustaining a current line, according to the aesthetic codes of contemporary times, the campaign raised its goals, challenging the target. Transforming every receptor in message sender, recovering the origins - spread the word of Christ. If we analyze the intentionality of the messages along the three years - from 2009 to 2011, it seems clear the strategy of increasing commitment. In 2009, the strategy focused on the "revelation", implied in the headline: "Discover a world you think you already know" .

And in the following year, the exploration of the sense of belonging expressed in "take a good look around you. There are more people like you. "Finally, in 2011, increases the proposal of involvement of the activist citizen with the strategy "You've been chosen! Spread the Word!". This call to active participation is consistent with the latest trends, in which the citizen is no longer seen as a mere receptor of messages but as an enlightened individual, informed, able to make their own choices and, agreeing with the themes that are proposed, having the means and power to spread them. In this area, nothing more appropriate than the social networks to do so.

In three years time, we can conclude that the Portuguese Secretariat for Vocations not only recognized the importance of a communication strategy in social networks as it has been using

them in a crescendo of expectations. In fact, by observing the three campaigns, we recognize a proposed gradual behavioral involvement: from ignorance and prejudice to the way of integration. From integration to active involvement.

Ultimately, Varnelis thesis is accomplished: "the formation of identity occurs in cases where the physical and virtual networks are occupied by individuals who are at the same time, producers and consumers, taking advantage of new forms of cultural production online." (Varnelis, *Networking Publics*).

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